

COLBORN, KATHERINE, M.F.A. *Holding Spaces*. (2019)
Directed by Mariam Stephan. 38pp.

This written thesis serves as a companion to the work developed in my studio practice while completing my MFA at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. My series *Holding Spaces* contends with themes of sanctuary, quietness, sacredness, longing, threshold, memory, and home. Born from a desire to fix the unfixable and grasp the ineffable, my paintings embody a gentle uncertainty that provide a measured space for pondering and offer a protected space for holding paradox. This thesis is a further mining of my material choice, a meditation on my various themes and motifs, and a contextualization of my work for the twenty-first century.

HOLDING SPACES

by

Katherine Colborn

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2019

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Katherine Colborn has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Mariam Stephan

Committee Members _____
Jen Meanley

Barbara Campbell Thomas

Dr. Heather Holian

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. MATERIALS.....	5
III. THEMES AND MOTIFS	11
IV. CONTEXTUALIZING THIS WORK.....	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	26
CATALOG OF IMAGES.....	28

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Arrival, like origin, is a mythical place.
—Rebecca Solnit, *A History of Walking*

On May 15, 2014, *On Being*, a famous podcast hosted by Krista Tippet, aired an interview with Rabbi Lawrence Kushner who, as Tippet summarized, said “the Jewish moral commandment, *tikkun olam*, is not so accurately translated ‘repair the world’ as ‘repair the cosmos.’” In the episode, Tippet shares an excerpt from a former interview with Rachel Naomi Remen, who describes the Kabbalistic connection between *Ein Sof* and human moral action as it was told to her by her rabbi grandfather:

In the beginning, there was only the holy darkness, the *Ein Sof*, the source of life. And then, in the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand, thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And then, perhaps because this is a Jewish story, there was an accident, and the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the wholeness of the world, the light of the world was scattered into a thousand, thousand fragments of light, and they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.

Now, according to my grandfather, the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world. It’s a very important story for our times. And this task is called *tikkun olam* in Hebrew. It’s the restoration of the world. And this is, of course, a collective task. It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world.

— Rachel Naomi Remen, *OnBeing's* "Lawrence Kushner: Kabbalah and Everyday Mysticism"

When I contemplate my position as an artist, I find myself returning to this story. What am I hoping my work will do in the world? And why? What am I responding to that could compel me to believe the questions I want to ask or answer are worth any viewer's time, let alone my own? This thesis is not a theological or a moral argument, but I wanted to begin by first presenting the former narrative.

Narrative has been a driving force in much of my practice. It is deeply woven into the structure of my thinking and is therefore inseparable from my studio work. Susan Stewart writes about narrative as a structure of desire, a structure that "both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between the signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic."¹ I have been very inspired by her book *On Longing*, where she explores nostalgia as she relates narrative to origin and object. She writes:

By means of its conventions of depiction, temporality, and ultimately, closure, narrative here seeks to "realize" a certain formulation of the world. Hence we can see the many narratives that dream of the inanimate-made-animate as symptomatic of all narrative's desire to invent a realizable world, a world which "works." In this sense, every narrative is a miniature and every book a microcosm, for such forms always seek to finalize, bring closure to, a totality or model.

— Susan Stewart, *On Longing*

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, x.

Before responding to that excerpt, I want to juxtapose it against a beautiful translation of a poem from Rilke's *Book of Hours*:

I read it here in your very word,
in the story of the gestures
with which your hands cupped themselves
around our becoming—limiting, warm.

You said *live* out loud, and *die* you said lightly,
and over and over again you said *be*.

But before the first death came murder.
A fracture broke across the rings you'd ripened.
A screaming shattered the voices

that had just come together to speak you,
to make of you a bridge
over the chasm of everything.

And what they have stammered ever since
are fragments
of your ancient name.²

I believe my personal desperation to pin down the messiness of the unknown—and the desire to navigate a fractured cosmos—has manifested itself in narrative. I have come to understand that narrative (in my practice) is, to borrow from Rilke, the stammering of an ancient name. At its best, it is an entry point, and a stuttering, circling, non-linear, genuine attempt to grasp at/position myself around that which I cannot identify but by its shadows, though to which I nevertheless feel deeply committed to and by which I feel undeniably sustained. At its worst, narrative is a limiting and restrictive

² Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005, 59.

dictation that closes more doors than it opens, denying any generative movement outward or onward. Much of the progress I have made in my studio can be explained by noting a shift away from the latter, moving slowly closer to the former. In what may be an oversimplified summary, my studio objective was formerly to convey meaning; my studio objective now is to embody meaning.

Much of my studio practice in the past has been a response to my longing to fix the unfixable, to comfortably hold the concept of the *Ein Sof*, the Other, the ineffable, the sacred, the seemingly impossible paradoxes I cannot otherwise register. In an attempt to understand that which lies outside of any temporal limits, I struggle to both escape time and to be firmly present in it. I am chasing an elusive ‘in-between’ that encompasses a simultaneous coming and going, unity and separation. This desire leads and returns me to the medium of painting and to many of the themes and motifs that continue to reappear in my work. They also help me identify how my work fits into a contemporary context.

But in my studio, if I’m honest, practice always trumps theory. When I prepare to make, I don’t begin with abstract notions. I must begin with narrative. While ideas often present themselves in the timeline of making, and necessities for certain methods become apparent as the ideas are more fully formed, most of my work still originates with imagery, which is only ever significant because of the narrative I have privately experienced and constructed around it. These narratives come from my own biography, from stories I’ve been told, and stories I create. In some cases, they feel inherited, but they all feel like mine, and always seem at the ready to experience deconstruction and recontextualization in my practice.

CHAPTER II

MATERIALS

It is not that beautiful paintings can't now be made. It is that we're not sure how to speak of their beauty.

—Julian Bell, *What is Painting?*

I entered graduate school self-identifying as a narrative figurative painter.

Trained in a highly traditional academic tradition, I left my undergraduate program making works that referred to an antiquated expectation of painting, that being one which told a specific story, grounded in practices I admired in Italian Baroque paintings or the works of French Romanticists. I treated the picture plane as a surface on which to illustrate an idea, and the figures in my imagery were often merely characters or symbols to serve that illustration. Narrative, in this capacity, suffocated me creatively. Because I felt stimulated within the limits I created, I did not seek beyond it.

Although it was a restricted artistic structure in which to grow, I do believe this time allowed me to develop a love and sensitivity to material that was essential for the formation of my most recent work. I can trace my fascination and appreciation for slow and thin application of paint back to the first time I copied an Ingres portrait when I was nineteen years old.

I was, perhaps immaturely, delighted by the revelation I felt learning the techniques of using a French triad palette. I was exhilarated by the notion that with enough time and effort, I could master the tonal and color shifts of flesh and fabric with

careful mixing and glazes, thoughtful placement, precise mark-making. I had no trouble spending hundreds of hours in front of an easel, because the building of skill—that is really all it was, then—felt like a justifiable excuse to temporarily abstain myself from the pressing awareness of time and expectation. I was mesmerized by the possibilities of even mimicking an image with something so tactile and so fluid. I was consumed by what James Elkins has described as the alchemical properties of paint. I was less concerned with exploring aspects of the interior life because I was hung up on the sensual and sensory nature of paint and my own ability to command it into being in this one, particular way. Even that one way felt infinite back then. The intensity of focus and the purposeful kind of visual attention required by representational drawing and painting was intoxicating.

In the near decade since that first Ingres study, my love for the material qualities of paint have not changed. But my understanding of that love has changed a great deal. As I have come to better know my own artistic temperament, and the questions that most absorb me, I can confirm that the slow and thin application of paint has more to do with my fascination around the slippery act of becoming and my deep desire for slowness and reprieve.

In *Holding Spaces*, my most recent series and thesis work, paint has often been applied so thinly, it is essentially rubbed into the surface. This slow application became a way to explore opacity and transparency. As a result, my paintings embody a confusion or uncertainty and thus maintain a seductive ambiguity. The almost-ness, the incompleteness, offers a measured space for pondering.

The mark of the brush (or sometimes finger or cotton rag) is rarely evident. Rather, the imagery appears either smoothly top of or emergent from surface, practically eliminating evidence of the hand. This apparition-like quality recalls ἀχειροποίητα, which translates to ‘things made without hands.’ This term refers to the earliest iterations of iconography, like the veil of Veronica, which were created miraculously and not by human hands. Julian Bell describes the icons that developed in Eastern Orthodox Church, noting that these images were “produced with minimum deviation century after century [because] the lack of individualized intervention made them transparent receptacles for their divine content.”³⁴

The reference or apparent relationship with iconography in my paintings is not unintentional. The soft and quiet nature of this work is created not only through the wispy appearance of white or other high key pigment, but also in the references to its surface. The traditional gesso and panel used in this series can be seen as a descendant of surfaces used for icons and altarpieces, and although the paintings are built up with layers and glazes, one of the greatest revealers of process is the gesso that dripped over the sides of the prepared panels. These milky drips, frozen like smooth plaster, create the effect of suggesting that the paintings, when displayed vertically on the white gallery wall, have somehow emerged from the building’s structure, or otherwise were constructed in a manner that defies gravity. Of course, it is clear they were primed in a tabletop fashion. But finished, on display, they subtly invite you to question the chronology of their construction.

⁴ Bell, Julian. *What Is Painting?* London: Thames & Hudson, 2017, 14.

I have been considering the significance of palette. Limiting my color palette dramatically was one of the first things I did upon entering graduate school. I made paintings and drawings that first were limited in chroma and extreme in temperature, imagery cloaked within deep staining phthalo blues or sizzling in hot, earthy sienna browns and Naples yellows. Perhaps there was something about the intensity of these extremes that appealed to me, and the potential they possessed when it came to suggesting both physical and spiritual states of being. While they were probably crudely obvious and overt narrative works, they were still made with a love of slowness and in search of what I now recognize to be a stillness. When I began painting domestic interiors, mainly using photo reference from my grandparents' home, the palette grew earthier, more muted, and the colors from their house placed the paintings themselves into a specific time. Perhaps in an unconscious desire to move these pieces out of time, I further limited my palette. I was drawn to the strangeness and versatility of Van Dyke brown, a color that is fairly neutral, and responds in kind to the temperatures of any pigments placed near it or painted underneath it.

I began to utilize (or rather, re-contextualize) underpainting as a method of toning the temperature of the image from behind. The notion that the entire painting was illuminated by a consistent glowing tone, regardless of how much of that warm color was concealed or muted by layers, felt appropriately in line with the mythical story referenced in the very beginning of this essay. For if I felt there to be some underlying unity to the imagery I was using, didn't it make sense to make my paintings, particularly the smaller

ones, act as a microcosm of or even a metaphor for the narrative that described the kind of universe that seemed to make the most sense to me? I began repeatedly drawing and painting images of my grandparent's bedroom and was particularly captured by the forms of their bedsheets. As I was repeatedly traversing the intimate folds in their bed, I became more cognizant of that space's importance and its symbolism.

The act of drawing felt appropriately intimate for this investigation, and powdered charcoal was an appropriate medium. As I was beginning to circle around questions of origin, memory, and longing, it seemed fitting that the very material I used was the ash of a once-living and growing plant, formerly breathing, now being controlled by breath as I blew it around on the paper. These particular drawings and paintings held only traces of significance, but I do think of that work as the beginning of *Holding Spaces*.

In the series of work that I made before *Holding Spaces*—which was made up primarily of small oil paintings on amber shellacked panel—the shellac acted as a warm radiance that glowed evenly and consistently under neutral or nearly cool color. The grain of the panel provided both an optical appeal with its allusion to the topographical and its distinct material property. Its smooth surface allowed me to rub, push and spread the pigment onto the surface with coarse brushes or bare fingertips, and yet still retained the appearance being treated with reverence. Within a few weeks I had built myself a lexicon, a new visual alphabet for a personal language outside mimetic representation. This was a collection of themes and motifs to revisit, dozens upon dozens of different trailheads that I hoped would lead me to a central point somewhere deep in the forest I

couldn't yet see through. In having an abundance of small works, easily at least thirty paintings on shellacked panel, I found myself in a position to use the paintings like an alphabet of sorts, to parse, organize, and utilize the elements of these works as constructs of a newly crafted language.

Working outside the medium of painting offered me similar benefits. While I feel more fluent and nuanced in the language of painting, the practices of working in video, installation and sculpture forced me to explore my interests in cruder and more intuitive ways. I was then able to circumvent my own tendencies to overwork or over-explain, and in a rather naïve way, I stumbled into bigger questions around opacity/transparency and window/surface, primarily because I followed a whim to experiment with melting and sculpting plexiglass. It was helpful to make these acrylic sculptures both prior to and in tandem with paintings and drawings of my grandparents' bedsheets. I circled the themes of entry, origin and nourishment by using video of flowing milk to engage with cracks I found in cement and dried earth, in some sort of desire to breathe life back into something so solid and unmoving. While these earlier experimentations are not what I would now call successful artworks, they were massively influential in helping me cultivate a less literal, strictly mimetic painting dialect.

CHAPTER III

THEMES AND MOTIFS

When something takes your weight, you fall open.
—Ann Hamilton, artist talk at Western Carolina University, 2019

Growing up, I had the privilege to spend a great deal of time in my mother's childhood home. It claimed many weeks of my summers and winter breaks, alternate Thanksgivings and Easters—even the occasional first communion or baptism was worth sixteen hours of driving when you were part of a large Irish Catholic family. Every time we drove from Northeast Ohio to Upstate New York (it was many, many times), we stayed with my grandparents.

They lived (as I write, my grandfather still does) in Schenectady, a city right outside of Albany. There wasn't a lot to do, but it hardly mattered because we rarely wanted or needed anything to do. This home was a regular vacation space for us. A consistent and predictable home away from home. A museum of my mother's former life that always hugged me and then enticed me to look around closer every time I entered it.

It was and is my favorite place in the world.

As I've gotten older, I've been more compelled to understand why this is. Something was different in this space. It was protected and separate from all other parts of my life and yet felt like the foundation of my sanity throughout the year. It was a true resting place unlike any other I have ever known. Bachelard introduces *Poetics of Space*

by writing about the significance of the home, specifically the house, as the first external receptacle and validation of our inner lives:

For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word... There is no dearth of abstract, “world-conscious” philosophers who discover a universe by means of the dialectical game of the I and the non-I. In fact, they know the universe before they know the house, the far horizon before the resting-place; whereas the real beginnings of images, if we study them phenomenologically, will give concrete evidence of the values of inhibited space, of the non-I that protects the I.⁴

— Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*

The visits to my grandparents’ house were markers of time and seasons; unconsciously, my child and adolescent years revolved around these trips. These were the breaks, the moments I could breathe and fall open and be curious and exist free from all expectations that accompanied my own home or routine. My cousins and sisters and I were fascinated by the former lives of our parents. We begged them for stories. We scrounged the attic for their old toys, notes, photos, or calendars (my grandmother was a child of the Depression and like others in her generation made it a habit of saving everything). I remember the moment, as a child, when I was first aware that I was sleeping in my mother’s former bedroom and that she was once my age, sleeping in it herself. The rainbow she painted on the wall when she was sixteen was an imprint of a past person I would never truly know or understand. I was immediately overwhelmed with nostalgia.

⁴ Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1958, 4-5.

This house has been my grandparents' home for over sixty years. It is both changed and unchanged. Not only was it a protected liminal place for me throughout my childhood, but it remains constantly in a state of being somewhere between past and present. It contains the history of my mother's conception and my grandmother's death, while simultaneously reiterating the visible presence of my mother's coming of age and grandmother's absence. It is the origin place of my truest and most unencumbered self, something that feels so fragile, it seems only able to survive in the gentlest and most in-between of spaces. It was in this place I tasted the essence of sanctuary and separation. This home could hold everything—all the impossible imagined things that don't make sense, you realize, until you are being driven away from it with your packed suitcases and sunburn, dozing off already with your pillow against the car window as you watch the sun rise while your parents cart all of you back to the Midwest, ending that year's idea of summer.

The older I get, and the farther away I feel from those childhood trips, the greater is my desire to extend outward the sensation of safety and tremendous peace that I knew there. That home—the place between my mother's girlhood and my own future adulthood, the place that repeatedly pressed pause on my school, work, social calendars and other anxiety-provoking aspects of life—held my weight, and I have since been chasing that free feeling of falling open that inevitably followed each of my arrivals at the house's threshold.

The irony here isn't lost on me. My artistic temperament is fastidious and, in many cases, tightly restrained. I believe my most successful works display a balance of meticulousness and softness because that balance (or maybe tension) is often what best embodies my interests and my questions. But I also often feel that painting is a way we convince ourselves of things we wish were true, or might be true, or that cannot ever be, but somehow are because we make them happen in some other, painted world. In part, my painting comes, as Stewart writes when she explores narrative, from a desire to make a "world that 'works.'" In an effort to justify my worth to my community and then to myself, I often over-do, over-work, over-talk, over-write. While I know intellectually that this kind of refuge is not a commodity and cannot be purchased, at some point in my life I became convinced not only of my need for sanctuary, but also of my need to earn it. There is a part of me that hopes that somehow, from the chaos of my own obsessive nature and my tendency to excessively and even unnecessarily produce, there can still be born a sanctuary, a soft and gentle moment that allows one to fall open and in doing so, hold two opposing sentiments together, at the same time, and be able to know and believe them both without having to cast away either.

There are a handful of themes that I continue to circle in my studio practice. There are abstract concepts and imagery that lends itself to those concepts. Rather than attempt to weave them together in prose, I have compiled the following list, which includes both, as well as some ways those two things have together translated into a

method of making, in hopes of offering an alternative interpretations and further insights to *Holding Spaces*.

In no particular order:

Sanctuary	History
Sacredness	Domesticity and home
Pneuma	Beholding
Ephemerality	Basins
Form and formlessness	Arrival/departure
Threshold	Cradles and Cradling
Longing	Transparency/Opacity
Seduction	Reflection/emission of light
Transitory experience	Arches/Doorways
Memory	Softness
Nostalgia	Mirrors and mirroring
Juxtaposition/Simultaneity	Reflections and echoes
Figure/Ground confusion	Layers and layering
Confusion of the horizontal/vertical axis	Veils and Veiling
Mirrors and windows	Positive/Negative
Origin	Perspectival Shifting
Inheritance	Folds

CHAPTER IV

CONTEXTUALIZING THIS WORK

In the world today, one would have to make heroic efforts to keep still.
—Thomas Merton

Our Western culture today is one that supports constant distraction, upheaval and interruption. This, as Jonathon Crary writes in his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, erodes the essential framework of everyday life. Throughout his book, Crary refers continually to 24/7 temporalities, the conditions of capitalism that have, since the Industrial Revolution, increasingly compromised the conscious attention of the masses and blurred the lines that formerly provided clear structure between work and leisure time. Crary defines the 24/7 routine and mindset as one constantly trying to keep up and stay ahead, and he explores the effects this has on individual identity.

I'd imagine this observation rings a bell for any millennial (perhaps any person in general) in the United States today. I have personally internalized capitalism in way that makes me desperate for reprieve. It is clear that relief from 24/7 content and routine is needed in order to salvage any hope for resistance against what Crary calls “the management of our bodies, our ideas, our entertainment, and all our imaginary needs.”⁵ Crary makes the argument that sleep is the only enduring natural condition still untouchable to capitalism and therefore makes it the best form of resistance.

⁵ Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. New York: Verso, 2014, 60.

I don't sleep much. I've had a problem with insomnia for years. I agree with Crary that 24/7 capitalism requires resistance, because the most sacred and ancient aspects of our humanity are at stake. I'd like to believe there are other ways to resist that involve a different kind of rest. Or, rather, if I can't resist the internalization of capitalism with sleep, perhaps I can resist, subversively, in making.

Of course, my work does not revolve around the resistance of capitalism. I am not driven to the studio solely by the thought I am fighting an overreaching plague that has been creeping into every aspect of life. But I am propelled in part by a desire for reprieve from my own compulsory drive of productive action. And that sense of relief, when I have found it, is what allows the necessary space to recognize the unknowable and unnamable things.

Painting, in its stillness and its imaginative capabilities, allows you to rest where you do not live. Painting domestic imagery only emphasizes this paradox. For example, in *So Short a Distance* (a title taken from a poem by Abraham Joshua Heschel), a rocking chair appears half-solid, half-vapor (see Fig. 1). In foggy titanium on a soft pink ground, I built a metaphorical cradle. In its small and quiet nine-by-twelve-inch frame, it unassumingly welcomes a soft breath, a pause that calls to mind the methodical movements of a rocker. Even in the stillness, there is the suggestion of a gentle motion back and forth, until the chair dissolves altogether, in the same misty way it first appeared. A cloudy white rectangle offers the possibility of being either a window or a form but is undeniably illuminating the chair and the blanket that is thrown over its backing. The nature of the suggested blanket is then also called into question; is this an

object or a window? For it would seem at first glance to be reflecting light, but is painted in a similar way as the white rectangle above it. Is this, then, a passageway or a veil that would bar you from one?

This painting, perhaps compared to others in this series, appears most unfinished. The suggested incompleteness has the potential to provoke a tense uneasiness, but I don't believe it does. There is a softness in the painting, after all. There is a grandmotherly tenderness in the wispy image of a rocking chair emerging from a vague pink nowhere that feels cozy yet unrestricted. A place that suggests a comfortable seat, but no floors or doors or walls. A resting place, but not a place of permanence.

The installation piece, *Sabbath Travel*, was intended to provide a similar experience, but one more physically immersive (see Fig. 2). Instead of a rocking chair to cradle the mind, the small benches physically hold the weight of the body, and paintings at the eye level of the seated individual, are shaped and placed to recall airplane windows. The lineup of wooden stools elicits the routine of sitting on buses and trains. The design and material (red oak) are reminiscent of church pews, and reverence is implied in the deep blues and indigo grounds imbued with a crystalline titanium glow. I wonder if this work is more successful in theory than in practice, but I feel strongly there are other—better—versions of it, still waiting to be made.

In September of 2017, Arden Reed published an essay in the Brooklyn Rail that promoted his book *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell*. In the essay, he describes an aesthetic field he calls “slow art,” which in the book, he describes thus:

Slow art is not, as you might imagine, a set of aesthetic *objects*. Rather, *slow art names an encounter between object and observer*; it refers to a class of experiences, not to a group of things. Slow art is what transpires in the space and time between beholders and beheld... The work needs the viewer in order to realize itself. Like a musical score, *slow art must be performed*.⁶

— Arden Reed, *Slow Art*

Reed insists that slow art is experiential. Slow art, he writes, “has no ‘essence’; rather, it names social, time-bound experiences... Rather than locate slow art either in the beholder or beheld I return to my definition: *a dynamic relationship that transpires between objects and observers*.”⁷

While the defining of slow art is naturally dependent upon a discussion around temporalities (the word slow cannot even be conceived of without simultaneously defining what is neutral, let alone fast), Reed also proposes that slow art is significantly relative to space, particularly as he argues that slow art offers a path to reclaim social spaces that have been stripped or devoid of contemplative practices that are no longer as available or structured as they once were. He writes:

⁶ Reed, Arden. *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell*. S.l.: University of California Press, 2018, 10-11.

⁷ Reed, *Slow Art*, 20.

The trauma of speed culture intensifies our need for downtime—the kind of retreats that religion used to offer. At the same time, such opportunities have diminished. The option of worship (like contemplating icons) shrinks in secular societies. We are left speeding along the Autobahn of modernity, searching for rest stops and finding them shuttered. Might experiencing art at a different pace reclaim social spaces evacuated by religious gazing? Could “slow art” be a modern, secular displacement of old sacred practices? ⁸

— Arden Reed, *Slow Art*

Reed’s research and questions remind me of another essay by Lawrence Weschler, in which Weschler recounts a story: during his college days, when Nixon invaded Cambodia, students and faculty passionately gathered in the commons to declare it one of the worst moments in history. A visiting religious historian interjected to tell the well-known story of Jesus on the Waters (from Matthew 8:23-27), in which Jesus goes out in a boat with his disciples to the sea of Galilee, and falls asleep. They encounter a bad storm, and the disciples become increasingly terrified and wake him. Jesus assures them not to worry, and goes back to sleep. The disciples, in terror, do not trust Jesus’s reassurances and awake him again. Jesus rises, chastising the men for their lack of faith, calling out “Peace!” and the sea is instantly calmed. At the end of this allegory, the historian concluded “that what that story is trying to tell us is simply that in times of storm, we mustn’t allow the storm to enter ourselves; rather we have to find peace inside ourselves and then breathe it out.” Weschler relates this story to the work of Vermeer, noting that “at a tremendously turbulent juncture in the history of his continent, he had

⁸ Reed, Arden. “On Slow Art: Introduction.” The Brooklyn Rail. September 06, 2017.

been finding—and, yes, inventing—a zone filled with peace, a small room, an intimate vision and then breathing it out.”⁹

Vermeer has long been an influence in my studio. When I was less mature, I loved his images for their precise and direct lighting, the sweetness of domestic moments, the soft and charming Dutch interior spaces, the formal compositional choices and the appealing way that they led viewers through a pictorial space. But then, for the first time I can remember, I saw a few of his pieces in person. In my early twenties, I was traveling briefly in Berlin while on a residency at a small art college in Ireland. I wandered through the Staatliche Museum and stumbled upon them, entirely by accident. They didn’t glow quite in the way I might have expected them to, but they were achingly beautiful. So quiet, and unbelievably intimate in their smallness. I was struck still. I could not tell you how long I stood looking at them.

Vija Celmins has spoken of the first time she, as a young artist, saw Morandi paintings, and was stopped in her tracks and compelled to gaze endlessly into the strangeness of it.¹⁰ I didn’t find those Vermeer paintings strange, but I did find in them a something I deeply craved and couldn’t yet find in myself: that holding space for falling open. And I found it in the precision, in the meticulous composition and deeply thoughtful consideration of pattern, line, colors, edges, light. The softness and the freedom and the quiet came about within it, even because of it— not despite it.

⁹ Weschler, Lawrence. *Vermeer in Bosnia: Selected Writings*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 19.

¹⁰ Ollman, Leah. "Giorgio Morandi." *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2008.

In her book *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art*, Jennifer Johung argues that contemporary art and architectural practices of “being in place” can be conceptualized in terms of an ongoing process of replacing home. She asks: “In the face of our nomadic narratives...how can we activate a network of belonging that is extended through a variety of places and over a course of time?”¹¹ Johung turns to a selection of contemporary art and architectural works to find an answer. She questions if it is possible, as one could argue it may be necessary, to replace home in the current world we live in.

Johung suggests that the desire to replace home stems from a knowledge that harkens back to an origin that, if not directly known, is indirectly understood. The language of the prefix ‘re-’ indicates a doing or creating in the image or in memory of that which has come before. There is a way our bodies and minds carry the need and knowledge for belonging that is unearthed in our very language structure.¹²

While Johung concentrates primarily on architectural formation and spatial situations, she does conclude that “replacement attends to the moments and sites of grounding, where bodies linger temporarily in spaces with each other...”¹³ She concludes her book with the following:

¹¹ Johung, Jennifer. *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, xvii.

¹² Ibid.: Johung refers to Elin Diamond, who writes: “‘Re’ acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition—and the desire to repeat—within the performative present, while “embody,” “configure,” “inscribe,” “signify” assert the possibility of materializing something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines other as yet unsuspected modes of being.”

¹³ Ibid., xxi.

If the process of replacing home punctuates pathways of departure and return, the cycles of use and reuse, with acts and structures of embodied lingering, then we must recognize and situate these tenuous dependencies—dependencies that form between those bodies held coincidentally, but also meaningfully, in place and that approach the experience of being and belonging at home.¹⁴

— Jennifer Johung, *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art*

Johung contemplates the viability of home as “both a material structure and an experience of belonging.”¹⁵ Ultimately, she argues that the act of replacing home is “founded on a recognition of the ways each of us [when we figure out how to] sustain and expand those particular materials and methods over time.”¹⁶

I have wondered, since reading Johung’s book, if in my work, I am merely chasing after an inherited desire for home. The imagery in my work teeters between that of the domestic interior and abstracted motifs inspired by transitory experience, literally between home and the motions that take you to and from it. Rather than embody or experience it, am I trying to contain home, as I did in *Preserving Ghosts* (see Fig 3)? In framing a corner of the home with the shape of a bell jar, could I fix permanently this illustrative version of my grandparent’s sitting room so that I might be able to examine and dissect it, or freeze it so as to make it forever possible to return to and always observe it? Or will I be content to repeatedly mirror it against itself to juxtapose both finite and infinite space (see Fig. 4 and 5), or suggest it as always present but on the other side of an inaccessible threshold (see Fig. 6)

¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁵ Ibid., 165.

¹⁶ Ibid., 166.

As previously mentioned, before making the series of gessoed panels, I made numerous small works on the shellacked panel. At the time, I knew I was looking for paintings that could hold the entire universe, and that I could still fit into my pocket. I was desperate to contain that which could not be contained. I wanted to physically hold the paradox in my hands. I made tiny paintings that suggested in symbol and in transparent layers of paint both the great cosmos and the micro, elemental nature of things (see Fig. 7). I wanted to construct the infinite within the intimate. Of course, none of these little pocket-paintings could do this the way I'd hoped. But if I could name my search and my hopes for the work, I had faith that it would be enough to sustain a practice.

In one of these shellacked-panel works, *Vista*, I used perspective to convey both an expanse and a block (see Fig. 8). With an archway, I suggest an entryway and then a near-overlook that displays an endless swirling amber cosmos and then simultaneously use painted imagery to imply a floor and remind the viewer of the inevitable flatness of the surface, the undeniable panel it is exposed to be. It offers both views. While I used this method of perspectival shifting in other pieces (such as *Washing*, see Fig. 9), I believe my most successful use of this was in *Dual Consecration* (see Fig. 10). In suggesting two perspectives, as a whole it exists between states of viewing and being. The use and non-use of paint questions the frame as both a window and surface, and the image presents multiple variations of emptiness and cradle, basins made to hold: chairs, cups, bowls, even spoons. There are moments of near-mirroring and moments of not-quite-right-ness. The position of one of the place settings puts the viewer in the piece,

looking down, and the placement of second confuses the viewer about with whom they are or are not dining. The setting would suggest some kind of expected communion, but the chair across the table is vacant. Its vacancy casts a shadow, against the illuminating backlight, making it the most present absence in the image. The painting is gentle and golden, which softens the entire experience, and allows one to sit with the confusion comfortably.

I want to make work that allows one to behold and be held. If my work does anything at all, I'd like it to enact a quiet resistance to late capitalism and "speed culture," and to act as a proper resting place for others to fall open. Perhaps this comes from an existential desire to create something that can serve the world in a way I personally cannot. It's dramatic and ambitious and perhaps a little ridiculous, but ultimately, I'd hope my work—if not now, then someday—can provide a still, tender, sacred space that makes it just a bit easier to uncover the scattered bits of light hidden deeply in the world.

.....

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1958.

Bell, Julian. *What Is Painting?* London: Thames & Hudson, 2017.

Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. New York: Verso, 2014.

"In Conversation: Vija Celmins with Phong Bui." The Brooklyn Rail. June 2010.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2010/06/art/vija-celmins-with-phong-bui>.

Johung, Jennifer. *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Ollman, Leah. "Giorgio Morandi." *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2008. Accessed November 5, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-morandi9-2008nov09-story.html>.

Reed, Arden. "On Slow Art: Introduction." The Brooklyn Rail. September 06, 2017.

Accessed November 5, 2018. <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/09/editorsmessage/Introduction-by-Arden-Reed>.

Reed, Arden. *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell*. S.l.: University of California Press, 2018.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Rilkes Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Translated by Anita

Barrows and Joanna Macy. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

Tippet, Krista and Lawrence Kushner and Rachel Naomi Remen. "Lawrence Kushner:

Kabbalah and Everyday Mysticism." *On Being with Krista Tippet*. Podcast audio,

May 15, 2014. [https://onbeing.org/programs/lawrence-kushner-kabbalah-and-](https://onbeing.org/programs/lawrence-kushner-kabbalah-and-everyday-mysticism/)

[everyday-mysticism/](https://onbeing.org/programs/lawrence-kushner-kabbalah-and-everyday-mysticism/).

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and*

the Collection. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Weschler, Lawrence. *Vermeer in Bosnia: Selected Writings*. New York: Knopf

Doubleday Publishing Group.

CATALOG OF IMAGES

Figure 1. *So Short a Distance*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019

Figure 2. *Sabbath Travel*, oil on panel, oak benches, dimensions variable, 2019

Figure 3. *Preserving Ghosts*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019

Figure 4. *Holding Space*, oil on shellacked panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019

Figure 5. *Aperture*, oil on shellacked panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019

Figure 6. *Cradle*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019

Figure 7. *Pocket Painting: Push-Pull*, oil on shellacked panel, 4 x 4 in., 2018

Figure 8. *Vista*, oil on shellacked panel, 18 ½ x 15 ½ in., 2018

Figure 9. *Washing*, oil on panel, 10 x 10 in., 2019

Figure 10. *Dual Consecration*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019



Figure 1. *So Short a Distance*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019



Figure 2. *Sabbath Travel*, oil on panel, oak benches, dimensions variable, 2019



Figure 3. *Preserving Ghosts*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019



Figure 4. *Holding Space*, oil on shellacked panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019



Figure 5. *Aperture*, oil on shellacked panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019



Figure 6. *Cradle*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019



Figure 7. *Pocket Painting: Push-Pull*, oil on shellacked panel, 4 x 4 in., 2018



Figure 8. *Vista*, oil on shellacked panel, 18 ½ x 15 ½ in., 2018



Figure 9. *Washing*, oil on panel, 10 x 10 in., 2019



Figure 10. *Dual Consecration*, oil on panel, 12 x 9 in, 2019